

# Cultural Analysis of Ernest K. Gann's *In the Company of Eagles*

Copyright ©1999 by Chris Watson

Gann Ernest K. *In the Company of Eagles*. Dell Publishing Co., New York, 1967.

## Perspective on the story

This story can be seen as one man's struggle with revenge and another man's loss of hope in mankind. Both men find mercy in the last chapter. The French pilot discovers it within himself, and the German pilot discovers it exists in man. In addition to the main motifs of revenge and mercy, this analysis will focus on other motifs including aviation culture, material culture, military culture, gender roles, and food as culture. I also include some perspective on historical fiction.

## The Author

Ernest K. Gann was a pilot himself, and his love of flying shows in the books he wrote. Some of the author's culture is also revealed by his choice of vocabulary. His use of one word in particular dates him. Throughout this book, E. K. Gann refers to antiaircraft fire as *Flak*. 'Flak' as a term did not come into use until World War Two, which was E. K. Gann's time. It was the short form of a term introduced by the Nazi Luftwaffe to designate antiaircraft artillery. This word was coined in 1938 (*Merriam-Webster*).

## The Story

Except for the prologue in December 1916, the whole book takes place in April and May of 1917 on the Western Front in World War One Europe. The prologue describes an aerial engagement in which a German Albatros shoots down a French Caudron in flames. The French pilot, Raymonde LaFrenier, climbs out onto the wing to escape the flames, and the German pilot closes in again and shoots the French pilot in the face from point-blank range. Another French pilot, Paul Chamay, witnesses this and swears revenge because the dead Frenchman was a longtime friend of his who might have had a chance, however slim, of surviving the crash had he not been shot by the German pilot. The German pilot has a bull's-eye target painted on the side of his aircraft. Paul Chamay is transferred to a fighter squadron.

The German pilot, Sebastian Kupper, is in command of *Jasta 76*, a fighter squadron flying Albatros D.III aircraft. His batman, Private Ernest Pilger, was an infantryman who is now Kupper's personal servant. Pilger reminisces about his leave of a month ago, from which he returned to duty two days early because of an encounter with revolutionaries where he used to work. Kupper prepares for morning patrol and thinks about letters to and from his fiancée Maria. Kupper drinks tea from the samovar before each morning patrol. The aircraft and pilots of the Jasta are described.

Paul Chamay is part of *Escadrille 322*, a French fighter squadron flying Nieuports. He has a lover, Denise, who is the wife of an aristocrat. Chamay is obsessed with finding the German who shot his friend Raymonde LaFrenier. Chamay's squadron commander Captain Jourdan, who is called "His Excellency" by his men, becomes a friend to Chamay.

Kupper receives a ham from his fiancée, Maria. Before he and his fellow pilots can enjoy it, a flight of Royal Navy triplanes attacks his airfield. A new pilot named Sellerman is shot down in flames on takeoff. Kupper's dog is also killed. The ham passes through several hands until a Corporal steals it from a Hauptmann (German army rank equivalent to Captain).

Chamay crash-lands his Nieuport. He meets two German airmen prisoners and personally interrogates them, roughing them up in the process. From them, he learns the name and squadron number of the German pilot who shot his friend. He writes a note to Kupper and drops it over the German lines. Kupper is upset when he reads the note.

Chamay is the first in his escadrille to receive a Spad fighter plane. His mechanic Babarin improves in mechanical skill, but Chamay claims engine cooling troubles as an excuse to take many unauthorized solo test flights looking for his personal foe. Chamay's lover has left him because of his obsession with revenge. His commanding officer is also concerned. On the German side, Kupper's squadron mates plead with him to take leave because he is obviously fatigued. Both men ponder their situations and motivations.

Finally Chamay and Kupper meet. Kupper is surprised after attacking a balloon. He manages to get on Chamay's tail, but then his guns jam. Chamay gets on Kupper's tail, moves to point-blank range, but then cannot fire when he sees Kupper's eyes. They end up saluting each other. Kupper applies for a much overdue leave. Chamay is a changed man, no longer driven by an obsession for revenge.

## Revenge

Revenge is found in many cultures. Ernest K. Gann addresses a common human condition. Chamay says in the prologue: *"That Boche was not a soldier. He was a murderer. I'll get him if it's the last thing I do."* (Gann, 14) Months later and in a fighter plane, he has not forgotten. *"Raymonde, my friend," Chamay whispered now to the morning sky, "when I meet him, you may depend on me."* (Gann, 67)

When Nungesser visits the escadrille, Chamay asks the great ace if he had ever seen a Boche with the target circle painted forward of the tail. Chamay is very persistent, and Nungesser warns him about hating a single man.

Captain Jourdan compares Chamay to Jourdan's dead brother, *"... killed by his own gallantry"* (Gann, 100). He says, *"I am aware of your special hatred for the Boche, Chamay. I hope you will manage to control it."* (Gann, 101)

After crash-landing near the front lines, Chamay 'interviews' two German airmen who are prisoners. By being brutal with them, he learns the name of his foe and the Jasta number (Gann, 168). He feels some remorse about this later on a train ride.

*Suddenly he remembered the two Germans in the schoolhouse. ... And exactly where and when had Paul Chamay been transformed into the kind of a man who would torment two such helpless men? (Gann, 177)*

There were ... other evenings when Chamay brooded on his purpose aloft ... (Gann, 228) He did not like himself on those days ... (Gann, 229)

## Mercy

Sebastian Kupper is older than most German officer pilots. His conscience plagues him about people he has killed in this war, especially ... *a certain Frenchman over Verdun. His memory haunts me ... (Gann, 83)*

Kupper is looking for mercy in wartime. He scribbles in a letter to Maria that Pilger reads:

*"I must find one thing to rescue me from total despair! I must know it still exists even among men at war ... MERCY! Pray God that I will find it soon! Then perhaps I can relearn hope." (Gann, 86)*

Kupper and his men are tired from constant patrols. One of his newer pilots crashes and dies in sight of the aerodrome for no apparent reason:

*Like the flaming Frenchman over Verdun, his hair on fire, his screams echoing down through the soul! "Oh, Haube!" Kupper groaned, "Your clumsy mistake has brought him back to haunt me!" (Gann, 105)*

Kupper's hands shake more and more. Steilig, another pilot in Jasta 76, advises Kupper to take some leave:

*"I am not the only one who is worried about you. The others are beginning to notice how your hands shake." ... "You are dangerous not only to yourself but to the rest of us." ... "Sebastian, apply for leave. We don't want to witness your funeral." (Gann, 202-203)*

Hochstetter, one of the Jasta's pilots, echoes Kupper's thoughts on German victory:

*"My God it's going to be an awful world if we win! We don't know the meaning of mercy." (Gann, 225)*

Kupper's inner reaction is:

*Mercy! Wasn't that what he himself had tried to show that flaming Frenchman? And with what result, other than a year of nightmares ... (Gann, 225)*

Kupper receives mercy from Chamay at the end of the book. This brings him peace. Chamay discovers it within himself. This ends Chamay's obsession for revenge.

## Aviation culture

In this book, Paul Chamay and Sebastian Kupper are both pilots, so they share aviation culture even though they are on opposing sides in the war. Being a pilot

himself, the author can describe what it is like to be “in the company of eagles.”

*Climbing an airplane gave moments when a man picked up his own spirit, passed through an invisible barrier and emerged into a separate environment aloft ... Now was the time when a man might even sing; the sense of mounting toward infinity placed all other matters in proper perspective ... (Gann, 64)*

*As the thrumming of the Albatros' flying wires changed to a wild screech ... Kupper kicked hard right rudder, eased back on his stick and brought the nose of his Albatros around ... (Gann, 125)*

Ernest K. Gann includes such important aviation culture details as the preflight inspection of the aircraft by the pilots of Jasta 76 (Gann, 40). Then the aircraft are lined up on the ground with engines running, and the pilots shout to each other from their cockpits “*Hals und Beinbruch!*” (Break your neck and leg!)

*... the magic challenge which had become a custom in many Jastas ... (Gann, 41)*

This is an example of culture peculiar to some German fighter squadrons of this time.

Ernest K. Gann shows his knowledge of the different characteristics of the various aircraft described in this novel, including their strengths and weaknesses. For example, during the attack on Kupper's airfield by the Royal Navy triplanes, Kupper thinks *A triplane could always fly inside a biplane ... All triplanes are slow. (Gann, 126)* This describes both the advantages and disadvantages of the Sopwith Triplane versus the Albatros.

## Material culture

Artifacts of everyday use are mentioned throughout the book. Military tools such as aircraft are also material things. One man can sometimes influence culture. For example, the triggers of the machine guns of the Albatros fighter planes were changed from being fired by the thumb to being fired by the trigger finger due to the preference of the top German ace Manfred von Richthofen (Gann, 72-73).

Jasta 76 has a tradition before morning patrol, which is the culture of this particular Jasta. Two mess orderlies stand by a table set with a crisp white tablecloth and individual coffee cups with the name of each member of the Jasta except for the newest members. Coffee, tea and cakes are served.

*The coffeepot was a battered German army field type...its plebeian effect was overcome by a magnificent samovar donated to the mess by Kessler... The samovar gave an air of elegance to the table. (Gann, 36)*

The coffeepot and the samovar are two of the many examples of material culture throughout the book. These particular examples also imply cultural ideas of social class or economic level.

## Military culture

The novel is set in World War One, so of course there is military culture on many levels of both sides throughout the book. For example, the conditioning of military training is referred to more than once.

*... the crunch of Pilger's boots on the brittle, frozen stubble sounded so much like snare drums he instinctively fell into march cadence. (Gann, 17)*

*He [Kupper] counted twelve separate groups of double bursts and was satisfied. Good. According to training and order. (Gann, 72)*

The relations between the ranks are made clear in several places. Feldwebel Groos, a noncommissioned officer, has some classic thoughts on this subject.

*In the military life, according to Feldwebel Groos, there were three types of hanging. For an officer's balls they employed a silken ribbon. Noncoms rated a comfortable leather thong. But when a private was hung up by his balls regulations specified barbed wire and they had better not forget it. (Gann, 137)*

*He [Pilger] was part of the double war, which was to survive among your own troops after you survived the enemy. (Gann, 137)*

*For one thing, Groos remembered, he [Kupper] looked at a soldier instead of through him. In the peacetime army he would never have made Oberleutnant. (Gann, 138)*

There is more than rank involved in military social relationships. In the interplay between Pilger and Groos in the officer's mess (Gann, 141), Groos cannot threaten Pilger too much because Pilger is an honored combat veteran who is the batman of the commander of the Jasta. Similarly, when the Hauptmann shows up in the mess and confronts Groos after Pilger leaves, the Hauptmann

*... again reminded himself that his victim wore the Iron Cross first class and therefore the usual bluster of telling a man he was a disgrace to his uniform and rank would hardly do. (Gann, 146)*

French military aviation culture was

*... a consciously democratic service in which pilots in the enlisted ranks enjoyed the same status as commissioned officers. (Gann, 57)*

There is interservice rivalry between different branches of the military. While on patrol in his aircraft, Kupper thinks:

*If we do not appear on schedule our own troops sing, "God punish England, our artillery and our Air Force." (Gann, 75)*

This is not limited to one belligerent or the other. Chamay experiences the frustration of the French infantry with their air force when he is pelted and cursed by marching troops. (Gann, 170) This was during the time of the *Nivelle mutiny* in late April 1917, in which large numbers of French troops deserted after catastrophic losses from poor leadership. You can be sure those French troops wanted drastic changes in their culture. Pilger encountered revolutionary talk among civilians in his hometown of Nienburg (Gann, 19-24). These German civilians also wanted drastic changes in their culture.

There are some references to the camaraderie of fighting men: ... *jostling each other affectionately in the unashamed ways of brothers in combat.* (Gann, 59) Private Pilger describes what it is like in the trenches: *There, a man's brain was almost fully occupied trying to avoid the next hunk of scrap iron.* (Gann, 84)

After the attack on the airfield by the triplanes, Feldwebel Groos discovers Private Pilger eating the ham in the officer's mess. Nobody told Pilger that the officers would not eat it after the attack, but he knew they wouldn't because "*I know officers.... Their stomachs are not like yours and mine.*" (Gann, 140) There is a difference in cultures between enlisted men who have seen front line infantry combat and officer pilots who rarely see death close up.

Other parts of military life ring true in this novel. For example, Chamay saw his commander Captain Jourdan had been ... *engaged in his endless battle with the military telephone system.* (Gann, 172)

## Gender roles

Paul Chamay warns his lover Denise about walking the roads alone among Colonial troops. This is an example of different cultures' gender relations:

*Some of the Moroccan units can be worse than the Senegalese. Do not wear rouge or paint your lips.* (Gann, 48-49)

*"Muslim teachers unanimously agreed in every generation that the woman should cover all her body except her hands and face, that is without any make up, from strangers."* (Buti, 41-42)

## Food as culture

Chapter four features a visit from the great French ace Charles Nungesser to Escadrille 322. The Escadrille's cook is an accomplished chef, and details are given of how he has to improvise because of wartime conditions in order to prepare a fancy meal for the honored guest. The high esteem which French people have for their cuisine is indicated by the following quotation: *He[Nungesser] claimed there was no finer food in all of France, which of course meant the world, than could be found in Normandy ...* (Gann, 96)

The travels of a ham from Kempinsky's are part of Chapters six and seven. After the attack on the airfield, Kupper tells Feldwebel Groos to share it with the enlisted men. Groos discovers Pilger eating it in the officer's mess. After Groos orders Pilger away, a Hauptmann (Captain) from a supply depot ducks into the officer's mess after returning an officer pilot to the Jasta. This Hauptmann is not a combat officer, and wants a roof over his head because he is afraid of distant shelling. He sees the ham and thinks that flyers eat this way all the time. He orders Feldwebel Groos away and confiscates the ham, but being without a chauffeur he gets lost in his car close to the front lines. He gratefully accepts Corporal Stein as a driver. Stein gets the officer safely to the rear, and takes the ham from the car when he leaves! Compare the Hauptmann's impression of flyers' fare to what they actually eat as described by Kupper in Chapter twelve: ... *turnip marmalade, strange-smelling bread and tripe, which was the constant fare in the mess.... Soldiers ate nearly as well in the support trenches.* (Gann, 221)

## Historical Fiction

The technical details and flying characteristics of the different types of aircraft described in this book are authentic, agreeing with everything I've ever heard about these aircraft from many other sources. The background historical events and characters are also authentic. For example, the great ace Charles Nungesser started out in Voisins, had

*... the skull and crossbones, candles and coffin all painted upon a black heart ...*

as his personal insignia, crashed many times and broke many bones just as described in the novel (*Gann*, 98).

In this novel, the Hispano engine of Chamay's Spad was made by Levasseur, one of several companies manufacturing this engine during the war (*Gann*, 216). After the war, Levasseur made a biplane called the White Bird in which Charles Nungesser disappeared with François Coli in a transatlantic attempt from Paris to New York before Charles Lindbergh did it successfully from New York to Paris in 1927 (*Lindbergh*, 129-130).

Chapter Six of the novel has the Jasta's aerodrome being attacked on April 13, 1917 by a flight of Royal Navy triplanes painted black.

*'B' Flight of No. 10 Naval Squadron, the redoubtable Black Flight led by Flight Commander Raymond Collishaw, scored many victories between May and July 1917. (Bruce, 135)*

Gann's artistic license does not far stretch the truth here.

However, in this book Ernest K. Gann has a German observer mistake these British Sopwith triplanes for German Fokker triplanes.

*Those were German airplanes—triplanes. Only the German Air Force flew the stubby little Fokkers and there was no mistaking them. (Gann, 112)*

This is historically inaccurate and is a problem I had with the book. The first two Fokker triplanes did not reach the front until late August 1917 (*Imrie*, 37). I wrote an [informative speech](#) in 1997 about the development and operational history of the Fokker Triplane.

## Conclusion

There are many ways to interpret *In the Company of Eagles*. A major theme I ignored in this analysis of Ernest K. Gann's novel is the limited ability of man to control his own fate, because that is more in the realm of metaphysics than culture. This is a book about humans written by a human, and we are cultural beings. My interpretations are no doubt colored by my own culture, that of my society and my own individual experiences. I am sure you have learned something about me as well, if you have read this far. Thank you.

## WORKS CITED

Bruce, J. M.;

*War Planes of the First World War, Fighters. Volume Two. Great Britain;*  
Doubleday and Company, Inc.; Garden City, New York; 1968.

Dr. Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti;

*Ela kul Fataten Tu'min be-Allah;*

Mu'asasat ar\_Risalah, Beirut, 1987, Eighth edition, pp. 41, 42.

Quoted by M. Rafiqul-Haqq and P. Newton;

*The Place of Women in Pure Islam;*

<http://debate.domini.org/newton/womeng.html>

*This link no longer active, February 2007.*

Gann, Ernest K.;

*In the Company of Eagles;*

Dell Publishing Co., New York; 1967.

Imrie, Alex;

*The Fokker Triplane;*

Arms and Armour Press; London; 1992.

Lindbergh, Charles A.;

*The Spirit of St. Louis;*

Charles Scribner's Sons; New York; 1953.

Merriam-Webster;

*WWWebster dictionary;*

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/>; search for 'flak' on November 28, 1999.